School Climate and Bullying

Denise C. Gottfredson, Ph.D.
University of Maryland

Presented at the Workshop on Increasing Capacity for Reducing Bullying and its Impact on the Lifecourse of Youth Involved

Institute of Medicine and National Research Council
April 9, 2014
What is “School Climate”

Personality is to the individual what ‘climate’ is to the organization
Students in schools with higher student/teacher ratios reported greater frequency of bully victimization and reduced perceptions of safety.

95 elementary and middle schools

School Climate and Willingness to Seek Help

- Students in schools with high levels of perceived teacher and school staff support are more willing to seek help for bullying and aggressive behavior.
- Ninth grade students from 291 Virginia High Schools

School Climate and Bullying

- Students in schools with consistent enforcement of school discipline and availability of caring adults experienced lower levels of bullying and victimization.
- Ninth grade students from 290 Virginia High Schools

School Climate and Victimization/Delinquency -- Important Dimensions

- Student/teacher ratio, # different students taught
- Sense of community
- Discipline management
Safe School Study

- 1976 national sample of 642 secondary schools
- Extensive data collection
  - Principal, teacher, and student surveys
  - Census data on the school communities
- Extensive questioning
  - Victimization experiences, personal characteristics, and characteristics of schools

Source: Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985
School Climate Predictors of Victimization: Safe School Study

- Ambiguous sanctions
- Large Schools with larger # of different students taught
- Low perception of fairness and clarity of rules
- Low perception of firm and clear rule enforcement
- Punitive teacher attitudes

Source: Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985
National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools

- 1998 national sample of 1,287 schools

- Extensive data collection
  - Principal, teacher, and student surveys
  - Census data on the school communities

- Extensive questioning
  - Victimization experiences, personal characteristics, and characteristics of schools

School Climate Predictors of Victimization and Delinquency: NSDPS

**Structural Controls**
- % male students
- Concentrated poverty/AA
- Size & Urbanicity
- Residential Crowding
- Grade Level

**Social Climate**
- Teacher Victimization

**Discipline Management**
- Student Delinquency
- Student Victimization

School Size and Student Victimization

**Structural Controls**
- Community Concentrated Disadvantage
- Urbanicity/Mobility
- Racial/Ethnic Student Composition
- Average Student Age

- **Student Enrollment**
- **Student-Teacher Ratio**
- **Number of Different Students Taught**

**Personal Victimization**

**Property Victimization**

School Culture Mediates Effect

**Structural Controls**
- Community Concentrated Disadvantage
- Urbanicity/Mobility
- Racial/Ethnic Student Composition
- Average Student Age

**Student/Teacher Ratio**

**Consensus about Norms**

**Personal Victimization**
Communal Social Organization (CSO)

Schools in which “...members know, care about, and support one another, have common goals and sense of shared purpose, and...actively contribute and feel personally committed” (Solomon et al., 1997)
Effects of CSO on Delinquent Behavior

**Structural Controls**
- Percent Students Male
- Concentrated Poverty/AA
- Size and Urbanicity
- Residential Crowding
- Grade Level

Communal Social Organization  Student Bonding  Student Delinquency

Lessons from School Shootings

- Ethnographic study of factors related to school shootings experienced in the 1990s.
- Teams of ethnographers worked in 6 different communities that had experienced lethal school shootings
- Interviewed people; collected records relevant to the incidents and what happened in their aftermaths.

Characteristics of the Communities

- Gulf between youth culture and adults
  - Shooters intensely concerned about status and protecting themselves
  - Adults had poor understanding of children’s experiences
  - Shooters felt there was “nowhere to turn”
  - Specific warnings given and missed
School Climate and Victimization/Delinquency -- Important Dimensions

- Student/tchr ratio, # different students taught
- Sense of community
- Discipline management
Can school climate be altered to reduce bullying?

Of historical interest:
1980’s OJJDP “Alternative Education Initiative”
- Project STATUS
- Project PATHE
Project STATUS

- **Program Description:** “school-within-a school;” integrated social studies and English class, including a law-related education curriculum and instructional methods emphasizing student participation, cooperative learning
- **Participants:** high risk students in grades 7 and 9
- **Implementer:** school teachers
- **Duration/Intensity:** 1 school year, 2 hours per day
- **Effect of Program:**
  - decreased crime (.36*)
  - decreased anti-social behavior (.23)
  - decreased substance use (.40*)

Source: Gottfredson (1990)
Project PATHE

- **Program Description:** comprehensive program to alter school organization and management structures; designed to reduce school disorder and improve the school environment to enhance students’ experiences and attitudes about school

- **Participants:** middle and high school students

- **Implementer:** school staff

- **Duration/Intensity:** 2 years (middle) or 1 year (high)

- **Effect of Program:**
  - decreased crime (middle school=.31* / high school=.15*)
  - decreased anti-social behavior (middle school=.16* / high school=.21*)
  - decreased substance use (middle school=.33* / high school=.15*)

Source: Gottfredson (1986, 1990)
Safe Dates

- **Program Description:** School activities: theater production performed by peers, a 10-session curriculum, and a poster contest.
- **Participants:** middle/high school students
- **Implementer:** teachers
- **Duration/Intensity:** 10 45-50 minute sessions
- **Effect of Program:**
  - 25% less psychological perpetration
  - 60% less sexual violence perpetration
  - 60% less violence perpetrated against a current dating partner

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

**Program Description:** School team approach; Team establishes expectations for positive behaviors to encourage and reinforce; Positive reinforcement system; Discipline system: Clear rules, consistently enforced – emphasis on classroom management

**Participants:** elementary schools

**Implementer:** teachers and administrators

**Duration/Intensity:** five years

**Effect of Program:**
- Improved organizational health
- Reduced aggressive behavior (teacher reports)
- Reduced peer rejection (teacher reports)

School Climate and Delinquency -- Important Dimensions

- Student/tchr ratio, # different students taught
- Sense of community
- Discipline management
Gaps in Research

- Efforts to combine ideas from earlier and contemporary school climate research to design more potent school-wide bully prevention programs.
- Rigorous tests of the effects of these promising ideas on bullying (large RCTs at school level).
- Research on how the school climate influences the effectiveness of individually-targeted interventions such as SEL-type programs.
Thank You!

Denise C. Gottfredson

- Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
- University of Maryland

gott@umd.edu
References


Project STEP

- **Program Description:** Redefines role of homeroom teacher to be more central in students’ lives; reorganizes classes so students stay with one set of classmates and small team of teachers for four periods
- **Participants:** middle school students transitioning to high school
- **Implementer:** school staff
- **Duration/Intensity:** 1 year
- **Effect of Program:**
  - Increased GPA and attendance
  - Increased perceptions of positive school environment (teacher support, affiliation, involvement)
  - Long term follow-up showed decreased drop out rate (43% vs 24%)

Source: Felner, Ginter and Primavera (1982); Felner and Adan (1988)